

Trust Wolfe? As far as...

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 23 Jul 1998

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Alex David Groce — 23 Jul 1998, 15:28

adam louis stephanides wrote:

I question, though, how much this is unique to 5HC. I used to have the same trust in Wolfe as you do, but lately I've been wondering. While Wolfe's other work may not involve deliberate deception to the extent 5HC does, there are certainly many in which the narrator fails to understand what is going on, and I'm beginning to suspect the ambiguity this produces may often be unresolvable. In the "Suzanne Delage" discussion, for instance, while each of the participants may have been "fairly certain" of the correctness of his or her solution, none of us seemed to get very far convincing anyone else. I've never seen a satisfactory explication of CASTLEVIEW. And when mantis himself suggests that we should "stop making sense" of the first half of URTH, well, then you know there's trouble in River City.

True. But I think the problems with URTH and NEW SUN and LONG SUN are (so to speak) minor--in general, I suspect we all have the same idea as to what's going on (LONG SUN being somewhat different in that Quetzal's motives, for instance, are unavailable until SHORT SUN comes out). When I read PEACE the first time, I grasped a lot (and immediately hit upon the "Purgatory" theory), then later ran across the falling tree PROOF that Weer was dead.

I'm just saying in 5HC the ambiguity is key to the thematic punch (and a masterful punch it is).

Now CASTLEVIEW is a fun read, but I can't "make sense" of it, but my real problem with it was that the end wasn't satisfying--and Wolfe's pay-offs, even in stories I didn't "get" very well the first time (such as SEVEN AMERICAN NIGHTS) are usually brilliant. Wolfe can give an ending where you don't know what happened, but it left a mark on you (something that happens to his characters all the time...) Of course, SOLDIER OF ARETE doesn't exactly have an informative or satisfying ending, but Wolfe says there's more to come. Actually, in the shorter-short stories, such as "Suzanne Delage", I think Wolfe is "playing fair", but may be over-estimating the ability of anyone to guess what he was thinking. When I ran across the name in Proust, I re-read it thinking "Aha, now I'll get it." Nope. But I still think there's something to get, and if Wolfe were of the mood to do it, he could convince me of it (not, perhaps, convince me I should have seen it, but that it was there.) Any one hidden facet of the NEW SUN, say, is likely to be missed on any time through--and in the shorter works, where there is only one facet, as subtly hidden, we're really in needle-haystack territory.

So what on earth is "Silhoutte" about, other than (I'm fairly certain) very unpleasant things?

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

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